

Paris Phone: From Bad to Bug

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PARIS, June 18 — Long condemned to one of the developed world's most inadequate telephone systems, Frenchmen are now being told they are victims of illegal wiretappings rivaling the Watergate affair.

With demands for parliamentary investigating committees into the wiretapping scandals due in both houses this week, the French press has started dubbing Paris "Watergate-on-Seine."

The satirical weekly "Le Canard Enchaîné" last week published photographs of what it said were official records of illegal tapping of one of its reporters' phone conversation with another journalist.

Despite the brouhaha in-

duced by the example of the Watergate hearings, the government is reliably reported to oppose any parliamentary investigations.

Because the Gaullist-tailored Fifth Republic constitution severely limits the establishment, scope and independence of such committees, the inquiry demands seem at best designed to let off steam.

No Dial Tone

"It used to be that half France was waiting for a telephone," one wit said in noting the waiting list of nearly 1 million would-be subscribers, "while the other half was waiting for a dial tone. Now it would seem a good number of us are being bugged."

Nearer to the truth is a general resigned assumption that telephone bugging is a fact of French life.

The outraged statements of prominent politicians denouncing widespread invasions of privacy might arouse greater indignation if not for the fact that they are often made either before or after the denouncers have served as Fifth Republic cabinet ministers.

There is a very stiff and explicit law passed in 1970 which clearly outlaws wiretapping and lays down heavy fines and prison terms for violators.

All Do It

In theory, a wiretap can be ordered only by a judicial warrant during an official court investigation or on the prime minister's written request in cases involving national defense or suspected espionage.

But, as the then justice minister, René Plevé, said during debate on the 1970 law, "there is not a single state in the world today which has renounced these means."

The major practitioners of wiretapping are said to be the ministries of defense, interior and justice, as well as the French equivalents of the FBI, the CIA, military intelligence, and the Renseignements Généraux, or political reporting branch of the police.

Local gossip has it that President Georges Pompidou is no fonder of news leaks than the White House, and that it is standard operating procedure to bug the telephones of top civil servants and even Cabinet ministers.

Journalists are also favorite targets for bugging. Public telephone booths and telephones in cafes and bars near newspaper offices are also said to be tapped just in case reporters become wary of calling from their offices.

'Control Group'

Although the published reports vary — and the government remains uniformly mum — the number of telephones tapped is estimated to run between 1,500 and 2,000 in the Paris area and from 2,000 to 3,000 in the provinces. About half the telephones tapped are said to be done so in the name of national security, leaving ample room for bugging of a more legally questionable nature.

The actual bugging is carried out by the innocuously

named Interministerial Control Group run by recently promoted army Brig. Gen. Eugène Caillaud with headquarters in old barracks next to the Invalides military installations on the Left Bank.

The site was chosen by the Germans. During their four-year occupation in World War II they installed the bugging equipment there.

Wiretapping is also done directly in basements of homes of those under suspicion or in nearby sewers, a more discreet *modus operandi* in cases which have not received proper official approval.

Copies of bugged conversations apparently receive fairly wide and indiscriminate distribution judging from Socialist leader François Mitterrand's assertion that he has been offered access to them but that he refused.

Yet another use of the wiretapping is said to be random checks on what average French citizens are thinking about the government.

Prime Minister Pierre Messmer has sought to disarm critics by letting it be known that as the man who signs the legal wiretap authorizations he has insisted on having his own private phone bugged to prove that he is above suspicion.

Despite such high-minded principles, public concern centers on persistent reports that friends of government VIPs have been able to have the phone conversations of business rivals, wives and girlfriends tapped.